New Fiction in Varied Forms

THROUGH THE SHADOWS. By Cyril Allington. The Macmillan Company.

THIS is another manifestation of extreme cleverness of some of the younger British writers in the difficult field of very light comedy—comedy that just stops short of being farce. It needs the surest touch to carry it off; a false step and the author is over the edge and tumbles into cheap melodrama or dullness. Mr. Allington is entirely successful in dancing along this narrow path. He makes his points without asking the reader to grant him too much, and those points are always worth making. The story is deliciously amusing from the opening scene in England to the postlude in Chicago. Between those points it is a joyous masquerade, involving neatly materialized "spirits," messages from the beyond and psychic phenomena, as well as disguised human embodiments of the spirit of fun.

Naturally, as it depends much upon its surprise effects, it will not be fair to disclose too much of the plot, but it will only arouse interest to outline how the stage is set. Sir Richard Atherton, then, is a jocose young baronet, certainly bold, but not at all bad. He is much in love with a wandering young American beauty, Diana Branson, who, however, is unfortunately encumbered with a mother. And that mother is an ardent believer in spiritualism and also a militant prohibitionist Sir Richard wants to gather them in for a house party at his place in Shropshire, but, most unfortunately, in his eagerness to interest Mrs Branson, he has told her a cock and bull story of a wonderful Prof. Lapski, mind reader, medium and psychic expert, and Mrs. Branson has demanded that Lapski be produced. Sir Richard promises to do so, using Lapski as bait for his house party. As there is no Lapski it is necessary to create one.

A further difficulty arises when Sir Richard's married sister, who is to chaperon the affair, telegraphs that she cannot come, as one of the children is sick. So Sir Richard persuades a distant cousin, Lady Mary, who looks something like his recreant sister, to play the part and masquerade as the necessary Mrs. Howard. So thus far we have two disguised conspirators. But that is not all, for Sir Richard's uncle Bob, Mr. Walton, is also to be of the party, and, horrible to confess, he is a brewer. It will never do to let Mrs. Branson, with her pussyfoot principles, know that, so Uncle Bob is persuaded to pass himself off as a retired Indian Civil Service man The rest of the party is to consist of a stiff Archdeacon, who possesses a daughter (as his excuse for being), the aforesaid daughter herself, and one of "the Ranby twins" to match her. It is the elder "twin," Lord Ranby, who is in love with the Archdeacon's daughter, the other twin being the Reverend Paul, a noble curate. But on the way to the gathering Peter, Lord Ranby, is inspired to pretend that he is his brother (they look so much alike as to be practically indistinguishable), and, Mr. Walton being present at this point, Lord Ranby feels obliged to go on. Thus the game is ready, with Lapski-England prepared to produce spirits for Mrs. Branson, and all the rest prepared to create multiple misunderstandings.

From that point on the pace is rapid and passes from one happy absurdity to another, always perfectly plausible and always mirth raising. The game, of course, is to keep the starchy Archdeacon and the terrific American mother from suspecting any masquerade. There is a large assortment of incidental trouble, too. For example, Lady Mary forgets how many children Mrs. Howard, whom she is impersonating, has, and is trapped into the necessity of equipping her supposed husband with an earlier wife, a divorce and an extra infant. The whole business is manipulated with extreme skill and never slumps. It is also unusually clever in that there is no final exposure; the spiritualist mother remains undeceived and the worthy Archdeacon is even converted to a belief in the spooks. The book may be guaranteed to provide amusement of a fine quality, and once started upon it very few readers will be able to let go until it is finished.

GEORGE WOOD.

THREE MEN AND A MAID. By P. G. Wodehouse. George H. Doran Company.

BOOKS may be roughly divided into three classes: Those that make you think, those that keep you from thinking, and those that impart facts. P. G. Wodehouse is master of the type that keeps you from thinking; and what a joyous, pleasing type it is!

In reading one of his stories you give all the time you might have wasted in thought to laughter. You laugh foolishly, irrepressibly, annoyingly to other persons who may happen to be in your vicinity and see no reason why you should be laughing. But you can't help it, even though you know perfectly well that the whole thing is ridiculous. Indeed, that's what does it. It is ridiculous and it means to be.

The present story concerns itself ostensibly with the efforts of one Sam Marlowe to induce a redheaded and romantic girl to marry him. There are two other men in the way, as well as that romantic temperament. But Sam can be counted upon to accomplish what he undertakes. One has no doubt of that from the beginning, so that there is no betrayal of confidence in admitting that Sam does get his girl. It isn't his getting her that makes the story. It is what befalls along the way. It is the revelation of Sam's means to the end. It is the unforeseen incidents that impede his progress and the people who get in his way.

Take the experience Sam has in the closet in the drawing room, while waiting through long hours until the family shall fall asleep to creep out and steal the lady's little Pinky Boodles, her tiny and vicious Pekingese; and what follows immediately upon his exit from the cramped confines of his temporary prison. Foolish, perhaps, but you laugh—you laugh weakly, constantly. It isn't only Jane, with her elephant gun, nor Smith, the bulldog, with a heart of gold. It isn't only the suit of armor nor the orchestrion. It is the combination of all these with Sam, with the spirit of adventure, and with the author's manner that does the trick.

But I think I like even better the scene with the redheaded girl and Mr. Jno. Peters. It is not certain whether Peters's first name is John or Jonathan, for all we ever get of it is Jno., and I at least believe that that is a contraction used for either. But this does not affect the story, nor the particular scene between these two characters in the play—it is almost like a play, and one rather waits at the end for the curtain and the applause—with the pistol figuring so largely, and with that sudden declaration of love from the redheaded girl which is so disintegrating both to Jno. and to the reader. This scene is one of Sam's fine efforts, and if it gets him in bad later it is not because it was not thoroughly well planned and perfectly brought off.

Sam's is not the only love affair. There is the one between the gentle Eustace and the lady with the elephant gun. Eustace has had his turn at being in love with Wilhelmina Bennett (the redheaded girl), but he has got over it. For a while he hated all women on her account. He had expected to marry her, and she was waiting for him at the Little Church Around the Corner. She waited from 11 to 1:30. He did not come because his mother had discovered the plan of the elopement, and had cleverly hidden every single pair of trousers belonging to her beloved child. Yes, that is the kind of fun with which the book is filled. You may not like that sort, and if so don't read the book. Not so much that it will bore you; it will convert you. But most of us hate to be converted, and so it is better to publish this little warning. Of course, it is all in Mr. Wodehouse's way. That is the secret. Let some one else tell this story in their own words, and you probably would have no trouble in keeping serious, though you might have trouble in going on with the book. He knows just how.

The scenery includes New York, an ocean liner leaving dock and proceeding upon its course, and England in various aspects. There is a dreadful seaside resort, there is a delightful country house, seen both in a rainy spell and later in all the effulgence of full sunshine, and there is London. All this background is painted in with a few swift and—you've guessed it—telling strokes. It is familiar to you immediately. That lane, where Sam so trustingly waits for his love, and where instead . . . could you not recognize it were you to find yourself treading its leafy length? Of course you could. You would expect at once to meet either Sam or else Webster, Mr. Bennett's gentleman's gentleman, or both. And though you get only the nearest glimpse of Sir Mallaby Marlowe, you have a strange feeling of intimacy with him. You are sure you could tell him across the golf links just by his way of swinging a club or of walking after the ball.

The book really starts out by giving you the impression that it is going to tell all about Mrs. Hignett's lecture tour through America. But it doesn't. There are good reasons for this, however, and even the grim, big jawed reader visualized by Mr. Wodehouse as resenting this omission will end by being content. For it's a good story.

HILDEGARDE HAWTHORNE.

WHERE YOUR TREASURE IS——. By John Hastings Turner. Charles Scribner's Sons.

IT is a singular experience to come upon a novel with those elements in it which are known to the trade as "love interest," "romance" and "mystery" directed at readers on the shady side of fifty. Not that aged lovers have not been used freely by novelists since "My Uncle Toby" was worried by the widow or since the mature Odysseus returned to his Penelope, but the rank and file of them are either of the comedy sort or the "comfortable couple," like Tim Linkinwater and Miss La Creevy, or else they are palpably young people made up with gray wigs and wrinkles, who really know nothing of the thoughts of age and make its gestures awkwardly.

But here you may find honest use made of those things which we know to be true of age; trappings of beauty faded to ugliness, apathy, disillusion and that unavailable wisdom, that painfully crystallized wisdom, which age desires with tragic intensity to give to youth but which youth cannot use because it possesses no solvent for it. Incredible, almost, that these matters should be capable of being successfully woven into fiction pattern; and that they also present the glamour of a fairy story is an astonishing and delightful circumstance. The stage for this drama of waning lives is one dear to all British novelists:

The sea front at Whyticombe is just like any other sea front. At high noon the asphalt, as if from sheer softness of heart, admits the indent of hundreds of holiday shoes. . . . Yet they make their mark for twelve hours at the most, until, in fact, the next day's sun cynically wipes them out with the fleecy and baffling pattern of other pairs of feet.

This paragraph is a very perfect beginning; a poet's or musician's beginning. It is not merely an orderly arrangement of stage setting, but the opening of the overture which continues throughout the first chapter. Though the footprints do not intrude again upon your attention, you do not forget them or the pathos of their writing upon the softened asphalt.

Next comes the attitude of the exasperating, too modern daughter, Alison, toward her parents, Joan and Peter.

She (Joan) managed a smile and a little nod:

"I see, Alison," she said in a low voice, "I see your point of view."

Alison crossed and kissed her on the forehead. She knew that she had hurt her mother, but she still thought that it was the only thing to do.

That is Alison all through the story—Alison the efficient.

"My engagement," she tells her mother crisply, "is none of your business."

And again:

"When you talk of engagements you are talking of the engagements which happened before I was born. Naturally, because that is the only kind of engagement you know. But you must see that you might just as well, from my point of view, give me a lecture on the marriage customs of old Babylon."

Thus youth plays its part, stern, scornful, dictatorial; in plain English, saucy. Mrs. Lemon, a little older and tarter than in "Holiday Romance." And not especially funny. There are not many laughs in the book.

They have come, then, to their British seaside resort—three old married couples and a bachelor or so, along with two youngsters who presently become engaged. They have been coming to this same place for their vacation regularly for a quarter of a century. But this time there is something wrong. Loveday Weare feels it almost at once. So does Joan. As if a storm were coming up. And Charles Cutman feels it . . . and by and by he discovers that he is tired of his wife—he hates her. And because always he has loved her and been good and faithful, the loss of this love for her makes him hate himself. And while he is hating himself the worst, he finds that his chum Peter feels the same about his old wife! Alas and alas! What shall the two poor old gentlemen do? And then the miracle happens. Whether they have wished at the properly magic time and place or—but it is of no use to speculate about the thing that happens. The point is that it does happen, when they have completed their unhappy confession to each other—there enters the fairy of the piece.

As they walked home, out of the faint summer evening mist, already creeping along the links, behind the little lawn upon which these two had lately stood, naked and bitterly ashamed, there stepped a woman . . . with merry eyes and a mouth that was seldom still, medium tall, whose years it would be hard to guess, but firm in her stride and full of good life.

She came straight down to the chairs on which the two men had sat and there paused. She looked from one to the other, a tiny smile playing about her lips, and the smile might have been tender or ironic, or even nothing at all, but the look in her eyes, and the eyes themselves were those of a Madonna.

It is this lady who is the mystery of the story. Who and what was she? What was her motive in making these respectable men fall violently in love with her? What do their wives think of her, and how is it that this curious element works out for the happiness of those whose destruction it seems, for a time, to threaten? Here lies the secret of this odd tale—the thing which differentiates it. It may be that the reader will not know, even when the author has told him as plainly as he can. It may be that the author is not entirely sure himself.

Yet, answered the barrister, slowly, "we did see her and we did touch her. . . . I don't care where it came from; I've never believed in God, Charles, not the matins and evensong God—but I do know that there are Godlike emotions and Godlike ideas which can be the property of men."

But whatever the explanation, "it was up there, on that great green hillside, that something—something had come to them, and made the

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